

House Bill 482
February 17, 2011
Presented by Art Noonan/Dave Risley
House Fish, Wildlife & Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Art Noonan, Deputy Director of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in support of House Bill 482.

HB482 would remove management authority by the Department of Livestock (DoL) for bison that originate from Yellowstone National Park (YNP), making FWP the sole agency responsible for management of bison in Montana. It would also require development and adoption of a conservation and management plan before FWP could transplant or release any wild bison on public or private land in Montana.

Currently bison originating from YNP are co-managed as a game animal under Title 87 MCA, as well as a species in need of disease management under the authority of the DoL. If nothing else, this bill would remove the confusion about which agency has what responsibilities regarding wild bison. It would also ensure FWP is the lead agency regarding management and conservation of wild bison – a role that FWP is best suited for.

There are fears by some and hopes by others that if FWP were solely in charge, management of bison around YNP would suddenly change dramatically. Those fears/hopes are unfounded since ultimately, bison in and around YNP are currently managed under the auspices of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) - an agreement signed and administered by five agencies including FWP, DoL, YNP, U.S. Forest Service, and APHIS. That plan outlines specific population targets, management actions, and dates by which bison must be in or excluded from certain areas. This is to minimize risk of transmission of brucellosis from bison to livestock. To change the plan requires consensus of the five agencies under the plan's adaptive management process. So even if FWP had sole authority for bison, DoL and the other agencies would still have a significant say in what might or might not happen with bison management.

It is our understanding that DoL spends approximately \$660,000/year and uses over 5 FTE implementing the provisions IBMP - including trapping, testing, herding, and if necessary, removing bison from the population. If bison were under the sole authority of FWP, those responsibilities would also transfer to FWP, per the IBMP. It would be FWP's goal to use sport and tribal hunting in place of herding, trapping, and culling to the extent possible. However, because of timing of movements by bison outside of YNP, even if FWP had sole management authority, FWP would still need to herd, and/or remove animals in the manner that DoL currently does (per the IBMP).

One reservation FWP has about accepting full management authority is that the funding that comes with this responsibility is not certain. It is our hope that APHIS would continue to provide funding at the level they have, however, federal funding for other species has proven to be unreliable.

As far as the requirement to develop and adopt a conservation and management plan before FWP could transplant or release any wild bison on public or private land in Montana, FWP is in agreement and has initiated such planning. Any such plan will include an extensive public outreach and public comment component, and would be consistent with the Section 4, lines 24-25 – “has significant public benefits ad public support, and minimizes conflicts with agricultural production.”

We believe the bill would be clearer if it specified adoption of a management plan before any *permanent* transplant or release of wild bison could occur.

FWP is committed to continuing to work to manage bison as valued wildlife, while respecting the agreements made in the IBMP. FWP is also committed to continuing to looking for ways to enable bison to exist on a broader landscape as wildlife, while minimizing disease risks to livestock and other impacts to private operations. I will be available for any questions you might have.